

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) II Project

**The Politics of Research and Linking it to Educational Policy/Practice:
Continuing the Dialogue**

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2000

IEQII undertaken by:
**American Institutes for Research
in collaboration with
The Academy for Educational Development
Education Development Center, Inc.
Juárez and Associates, Inc.
The University of Pittsburgh**

Contract Number HNE-I-00-97-00029-00

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My co-authors and I want to thank Owen van den Berg for his thoughtful comments on our "Choices" article (Ginsburg et al. 1995). Indeed, van den Berg's response should help to promote an even more interesting dialogue than our article alone might have stimulated.

While I have devoted considerable attention to issues of change and "reform" in education in other writings (Ginsburg et al. 1990; Ginsburg 1991; Ginsburg and Cooper 1994), Van den Berg is correct in his comment that the "Choices" paper "is not informed by any explicit notion ... of change." We could -- and perhaps should -- have discussed alternative conceptions of the educational change process (e.g., functionalist, interpretivist, versus conflict perspectives; individual, institutional, local, national, versus global foci), and how these inform our discussion, particularly in the section on "Connecting Research and Educational Policy and Practice." Actually, we felt that the different assumptions about how educational change occurs -- and who does (or should) participate in the change process -- were presented, if only implicitly, in the discussion of the decision-oriented research, collaborative action research, and research as collective praxis models.

I wonder to which authors van den Berg is referring when he states that he found himself "disagreeing strongly with the authors' understanding of policy as something exercised only by those in positions of formal power." Certainly, some of the people whose work we draw on might have such an understanding, but one of the points we try to clarify is that the methodological (and political) choices one makes lead researchers to provide information to or engage in struggle for educational and social change with different groups of people -- e.g., those in formal position of power, those who play "professional" roles serving to perpetuate or challenge the status quo, and those who are oppressed by current power arrangements.

Having devoted a considerable energy to highlighting the political dimension of the work and lives of educators, including educational researchers (e.g., Ginsburg 1987; Ginsburg et al., 1992; Ginsburg 1995; Ginsburg and Lindsay 1995), I was taken aback that an essay which I co-authored would be seen as ignoring or de-emphasizing politics. At first, I thought my worst fears had been realized: by participating in a project funded by USAID I had somehow conspired to silence my voice. But in re-reading the manuscript I sense that what apparently provoked van den Berg's concern is that the different sections of the paper represented, more or less authentically, different voices. This occurred not only because of the multiple authorship, but because we all were trying to present the different perspectives so that others could make a choice.

While van den Berg (and I) -- working within a critical science paradigm -- may tend to stress that all research and other human activity is political, this is not how other people operating within other paradigms tend to view things. Of course, deciding to discuss critical science as a paradigm and "research as collective praxis" as an approach to linking research and policy/practice was a political decision -- as would be deciding not to do so. But, in addition, to overlay the discussion of different perspectives with an analysis grounded in only one paradigm (the critical) was not conceived to be our project.

Finally, I want to explain why my colleagues and I did not "tell ... what is actually going on in [the IEQ] project." It was not, as van den Berg asserts, that we don't "feel any obligation (political or ethical)" to do so. Rather, it was because this paper was written during the early stages of the project. The purpose was not to analyze what was beginning to take place in Ghana, Guatemala, Mali, and the United States, but to introduce some ideas -- "methodological choices" with related epistemological, technical and political implications -- to encourage a dialogue. The participants in this dialogue were considered to be those involved in the Improving Educational Quality project, both members of the "Host Country Research Teams" (i.e., university-based, ministry-based, or independent contractor researchers who are native to the respective societies in which the project was operating) as well as members of the U.S. Research Support Team (consultants from the U.S. who played a variety of roles: e.g., trainer, technical assistant, collaborator). In publishing this paper, we were seeking to involve in the dialogue a broader group of colleges engaged in similar challenging activities.

We are now in the process of writing up our analysis of what we are calling "research--dialogue/dissemination--policy--practice" cycles or spirals that have occurred within the project. Given the space constraints of this response, however, it doesn't seem appropriate to try to put what van den Berg terms the "real stuff" on stage in this venue. Suffice it to say that van den Berg (and others in our hoped-for audience) will find evidence to both support and challenge their fears about how such international assistance projects are socially constructed.

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